Chapter XXXVI
Divergent News Media in Computer Mediated News Communication

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ABSTRACT

The focus of computer mediated communication research has been lying on the dialogical aspect of Internet communication while the presentation and consumption of online news have been understudied. In this chapter, we make a strong plead to not studying the Internet as one, homogeneous medium, but instead as a meta-medium that carries various divergent news media with specific formal and structural features. These features are important as they influence the information-processing that encompasses the computer mediated news consumption and are, as we suggest, essential when doing communication research. Both the results of a content analysis of the online coverage of the 2006 elections in Flanders, Belgium, and the literature overview of the black-box of information-processing of online news make strong appeal to computer mediated communication scholars to invest in studies towards the form and structure of online news media in order to better understand the total process of computer mediated news communication.

INTRODUCTION

In the traditional view, communication is considered as the transmission of information, or the linking of sender and receiver. In this view the computer is the channel through which the information is sent between sender and receiver and is only in charge of the transmission of the message (Hanssen et al., 1996). Scholars in the domain of computer mediated communication, however, suggest that information presented and consumed on the computer is not just transmitted from sender to receiver but also, and especially, mediated (Steuer, 1995). Especially since the radical success of the Internet as communication infrastructure, this study of computer mediated communication has gained a lot of attention.

The Internet as medium under study, however, is not one-dimensional. The Internet can be considered to be a publication medium (e.g., news Web sites), a social medium (e.g., blogs and e-mail) and a consultation medium (e.g., search engines,

user-generated content). As CMC researchers explore if and how communication is different when it is mediated by the Internet (Thurlow et al., 2004), they should take into account this many-sided approach and study the interface of the media, how discourse occurs within online communities and how the media are discovered and accessed (Chen & Gaines, 1996). Many, if not to say most, of the studies in CMC focus on the interpersonal communication and discuss the different communication services and applications online to investigate which channels can be and are used by citizens and what type of interaction occurs (Thurlow et al., 2004). We suggest that it is better to go further and also study what information is published through online platforms, how this information is presented, and how citizens can access and consume this information. The Internet is, in this approach of CMC, not only considered to be a medium through which a specific type of interpersonal interaction is mediated, but more broadly as the carrier of information and the information itself, as well as all information services (Hanssen et al., 1996) through which a specific type of news consumption is possible. Studying the representation and consumption of information next to the dialogical communication is imperative, since the immense success of Web pages that function primarily as news sites for information dissemination and are characterized with a different logic than the more dialogical spaces like newsgroups, mailing lists, bulletin boards and e-mail (Oblak, 2005) or as Resnick (1998) states: "Web sites are creating an experience unlike the amorphous dialogue of the newsgroups and listservs" (p. 49).

In the following sections, we discuss three main issues:

We provide background about the theory of media logic and discuss how the media do not only influence the dialogical function of CMC but also shape the presentation of online information.

The main focus of this chapter studies online journalism as a form of computer mediated communication and discusses why we should not consider the Internet, that functions as the online publication platform, as a uniform medium, but instead as a metamedium that contains various divergent news media with specific structural and formal features.

Building further on these insights, an overview of literature from the domain of cognitive psychology makes it possible to discuss and assess the possible effects of multimedia, interactivity and hypertext during computer mediated news communication and shows us how scholars should study the effects of structure and form on learning from the news during computer mediated news communication.

BACKGROUND

The importance of the study of the formal and structural features of online 'products' as well as the relevance of research on the possible effects of these features on consumption during computer mediated communication seem, at first glance, to speak for themselves. However, a survey of the literature shows that CMC scholars have, until now, largely neglected this domain of study and not carried out much research on the process of production nor on the effects on consumption, but instead have been focusing on the dialogical function of communication through and over the Internet. Scholars have been studying the textual aspects of CMC in contrast to non-mediated communication and even have been applying theories of face-to-face interaction to this specific type of communication (e.g., Dubrovsky et al., 1991). This dialogical and text-bias has largely ignored the multi-media dimensions of CMC and precluded the development of theories and models that fit the contemporary issues of CMC. Soukup (2000) suggests seeing CMC as a multimedia type of communication and, as a consequence, to study the non-textual components of CMC. As more and more online media integrate multimedia

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